

ST. PAUL

# Union Depot gets boost

Congress approves  
\$50 million in funding  
toward revitalization

BY MARA H. GOTTFRIED  
*Pioneer Press*

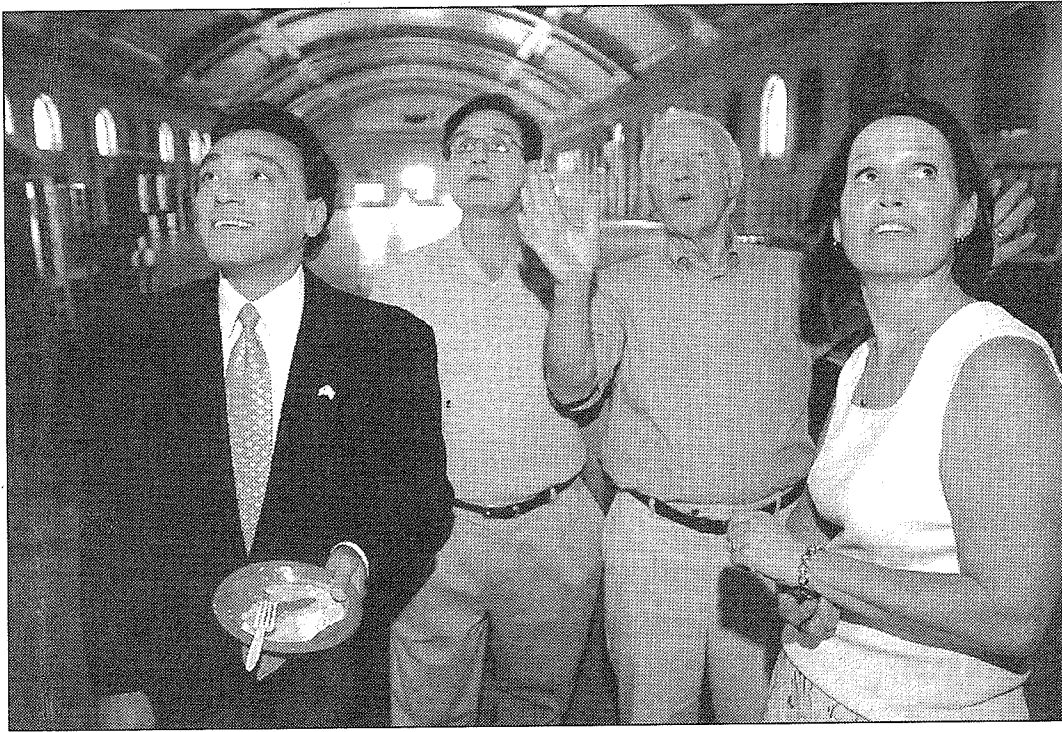
The renovation of St. Paul's Union Depot, which saw its last train pull away in 1971, into a bustling transit hub is moving from dream to reality, boosters said Saturday as they celebrated the first major funding the project has received.

In a transit bill approved Friday, Congress allocated \$50 million to revitalize Union Depot.

"Imagine, if you will, walking through the beautiful Depot head house ... proceeding on through the magnificent concourse building, buying your ticket for a high-speed train to Milwaukee or Chicago, going down an enclosed escalator to the tracks below, seeing all modes of transportation, each with their own gates on the platform," said St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly.

At its peak, officials hope Union Depot will be a place where light rail, Amtrak, commuter rail, high-speed trains, Greyhound buses and other transit services converge. Planners also are hoping for shops, restaurants, offices and condominiums.

Getting the revitalized depot off the ground is estimated to cost at least \$350 million, said Ramsey County Commissioner Rafael Ortega, who is also chairman of the county's regional rail authority.



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**Ramsey County Commissioner Rafael Ortega**, from left, St. Paul Mayor **Randy Kelly** and U.S. Reps. **Jim Oberstar**, D-Chisholm, and **Betty McCollum**, D-St. Paul, explain their plans for the renovation of the main concourse in the Union Depot in St. Paul on Saturday.

## Union Depot

(continued)

The price tag doesn't include the cost of such projects as the \$840 million Central Corridor light-rail line linking downtown Minneapolis to Union Depot by University Avenue or the \$262 million Red Rock Corridor commuter rail line from Hastings to Minneapolis through the Union Depot.

Lea Schuster, Transit for Livable Communities executive director, said it may take time, but she expects plans for Union Depot will come through.

"I think that the people of Minnesota really understand it's time for us to make investments in transit and I think the politicians are starting now to catch up," she said.

Moving forward with the depot is contingent upon the U.S. Postal Service, which owns the depot's concourse, selling its property to the St. Paul Port Authority and moving its mail-sorting operation and loading docks to an expanded complex in Eagan, which it has said will happen.

Negotiations to buy the post office began last month. Kelly said Saturday he couldn't comment on details, but said talks "will proceed with added vigor as a result of these new federal dollars."

If all goes as planned, the post office's move should be completed in 2009, Ortega said. In the meantime, preliminary restoration and construction of the depot's concourse will begin, he said.

Kelly's principal opponent in his re-election bid, Chris Coleman, said he worked on Union Depot revitalization issues when he was a St. Paul City Council member and

believes its renovation provides "a fantastic opportunity" for the community.

Construction of the depot was completed in 1923. In its heyday, 149 trains made their way through the depot each day. But with the decline of rail travel, trains stopped running there in 1971.

Today, there are restaurants in the depot's lobby, offices on the second floor and plans to build condominiums. But the concourse is a dim, dirty place — its large skylights have been painted over, reliefs around the ceiling depicting the history of transportation need work and tracks under the concourse have to be restored. Still, many hope to return it to its former splendor.

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul, and others who gathered at the Union Depot on Saturday credited U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Chisholm, with shepherding the funding for the depot through the

## HISTORY

**1881:** The first Union Depot was built. It burned down in 1915.

**1917:** Construction of a new depot, designed by Chicago architect Charles Frost, began.

**1923:** After delays caused by World War I, the new Union Depot was completed.

**1926:** Union Depot sold 449,000 passenger tickets. One hundred forty-nine trains moved in and out of the depot every day.

**1970:** Ticket sales dropped to 47,752; only 13 trains moved through each day.

**1971:** The last train pulled out April 30.

**1983:** Two restaurants opened on the first floor. The depot was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**June 2005:** Postal Service announced its move from Kellogg Boulevard headquarters to Eagan, allowing plans for a transit hub to move forward.

**July 30, 2005:** A long-delayed federal transportation bill included \$50 million for rehabilitation of the depot.

— Erin Pfeiffer

\$286.4 billion transit bill. Oberstar is the ranking minority member on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

"It's going to be a beacon for the future. ... It's going to renew the spirit of this city, of this state, of this Midwest," Oberstar said.

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